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ABSTRACT

In response to the need for evidence of 4-H impact on youth development, a national, randomly selected adult sample--710 former 4-H members, 743 former members of other youth organizations, and 309 nonparticipants in youth organizations--was contacted by telephone in 1985. The life skills perspective was utilized to measure the impact of 4-H in helping young people develop the basic competency, coping, and contributory life skills needed to become self-directing, productive, and contributing members of society. Those who had joined 4-H and other youth groups were similar in personal characteristics, but different from the nonparticipants. Activities, organized clubs, and competition were the most popular forms of 4-H participation. 4-H alumni most valued the inputs and teachings of adult volunteer leaders, family members, and club meetings. Generally, those who participated the longest, joined at an early age, and were female were the most satisfied with their 4-H experience. 4-H membership was rated by alumni as having a high, positive image, but three factors were identified which could improve the growth and impact of 4-H: enhance visibility of 4-H to all youth; recognize different needs of older youth; and couple development of leadership skills with leadership opportunities. Bar graphs supplement the text. (BRDR)

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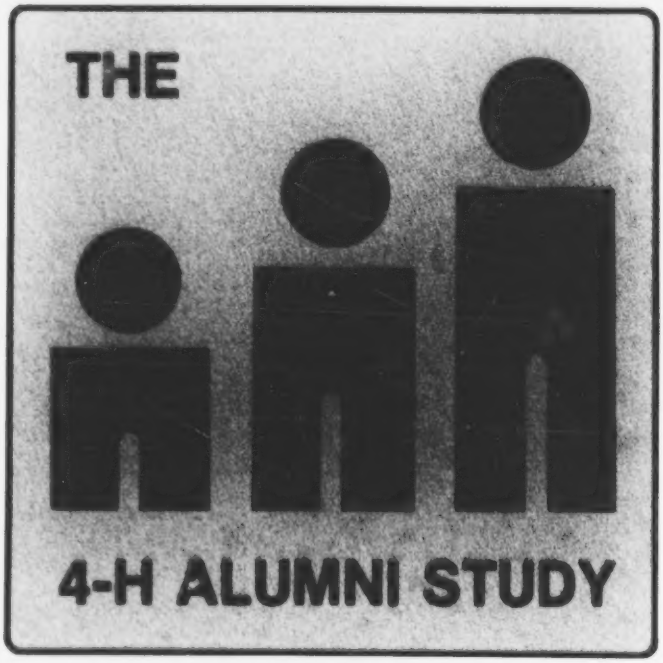

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RC 016250

Does 4-H Make a Difference?

February 1987

Does 4-H Make a Difference?

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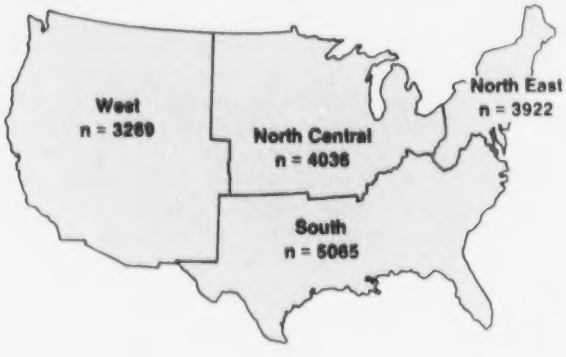
February 1987

The 4-H youth program is one of the oldest and largest nontraditional educational efforts in public education in the United States. For nearly 80 years, 4-H has existed, in part, to help young people become mature, competent adults.

Over the years, efforts to assess the effectiveness of the 4-H program have been rather limited. In fact, most efforts have focused on the program's ability to reach increasing numbers of participants, with few addressing the impact of 4-H on its participants. In today's environment of complex problems, budget restraints and expensive program alternatives, evidence is needed concerning who benefited, by how much, and what difference does it make that individuals participated in 4-H.

In response to the need for evidence of 4-H impact on youth development, the Extension Service of the United States Department of Agriculture funded a national study of a cross-section of adult members of society. This nationwide study was conducted by the Texas Agricultural Extension Service in cooperation with the Department of Rural Sociology, Texas Agricultural Experiment Station. A randomly selected sample of individuals included 710 former 4-H members, 743 former members of other youth organizations and 309 nonparticipants in youth organizations. These individuals were interviewed by telephone during the fall of 1985. Because the total number of respondents from the four Extension administrative regions and between each sex varied more than expected, the data were weighted to adjust for these differences and to correspond to national population distributions. As a consequence of these weighting efforts, the findings of this study are based on a weighted sample size of 16,177.

Figure 1. Study regions and weighted sample sizes.



Development of Life Skills

This study utilized the life skills perspective as a guide in attempting to measure the impact of the 4-H program to help young people develop the basic **competency** (knowledge and skills), **coping** (self-expression in group settings) and **contributory** (helping others) life skills needed to become self-directing, productive and contributing members of society. A general model of youth experiential learning (presented in Figure 2) was followed. The model depicts adult community involvement (sharing skills) as being influenced by the life skills an individual develops as a youth. Life skills, in turn, are affected by the type and quality of organizational learning experiences an individual encounters. Such learning experiences are influenced by specific features of one's background.

Figure 2. Youth experiential learning model.

Comparison of 4-H and Non-4-H Experiences

Utilizing the Life Skills Model as a guide, this study attempted to answer five questions. Each question is presented below with a summary of its findings comparing 4-H alumni, past participants in other youth programs and nonparticipants in such programs.

- **Do 4-H alumni differ on selected characteristics from those who did not participate in 4-H?**

  4-H alumni and past participants of other youth programs were more alike than nonparticipants in term of race, years of age, level of family income and number of children currently participating in youth programs. Nonparticipants had slightly more minority representation, were older and had lower levels of

education attainment, employment status and family income. Differences between 4-H alumni and other respondents were apparent with regard to where they resided most of their early life and to their children's participation in youth programs. Alumni were reared primarily in rural areas and were more likely to have children in a 4-H program. Conversely, other respondents were reared primarily in urban areas and were likely to have children in different youth programs. However, less than half of all respondents with children reported participation activity in youth programs for their children.

In sum, those who joined 4-H generally were not significantly different in personal characteristics from those who joined other youth organizations. There was a difference, however, in the characteristics of those who joined organizations as youth when compared to those who did not join organizations as youth.

- **In what types of youth development activities did respondents most often participate?**

Almost 53 percent of the 4-H alumni reported having membership in other organizations—primarily church groups and scouts (Figure 3). A comparison of 4-H alumni membership to non-4-H alumni membership (Figure 4) indicates that 4-H alumni were more active in FFA/FHA while other participants were more active in all other organizations compared.

Figure 3. Other organizations to which 4-H alumni held membership as youth.

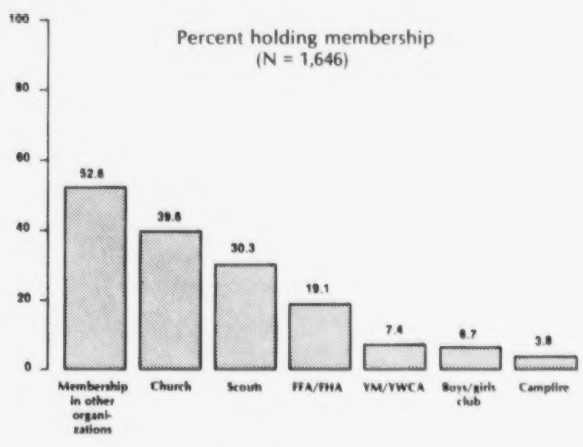
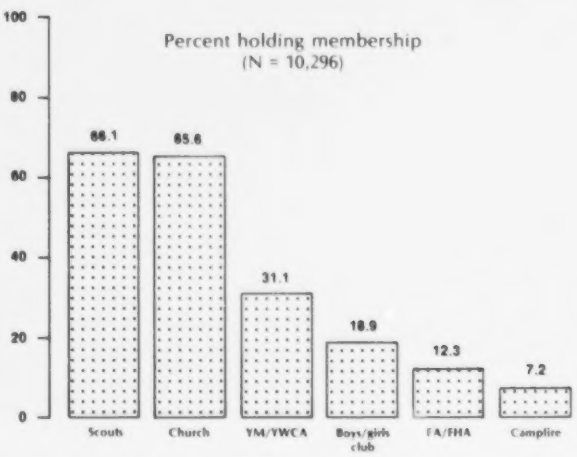


Figure 4. Organizations in which other participants held membership as youth.



For 4-H alumni, activities, organized clubs and competition were the most popular forms of 4-H participation. 4-H alumni most valued the inputs and teachings of adult volunteer leaders, family members and club meetings. Among those alumni who also participated in other organizations, a slight majority rated those experiences over 4-H in developing leadership skills and receiving responsibilities. Conversely, a slight majority rated their 4-H experiences higher in gaining knowledge and skills and in developing a feeling of self-worth.

The average age at which respondents joined youth organizations was 10.6 years for 4-H alumni and 9.5 years for other participants. 4-H alumni stayed for 4 years while other participants held membership for 6 years. It was found that those who stayed in 4-H the longest were most likely to have joined at an early age, resided in a rural area, lived in the southern/north central regions of the nation and were male. For other participants, longer membership came from those who joined early, were female, resided in urban areas and lived in the northeastern/western regions of the country.

Non-4-H'ers were asked why they did not join 4-H in their youth. Almost 60 percent said the program was unavailable. Less than one in five respondents said 4-H did not meet their interest or they were unaware of the program (Figure 5).

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Figure 5. Reasons given by non-4-H respondents for not joining 4-H as youths.

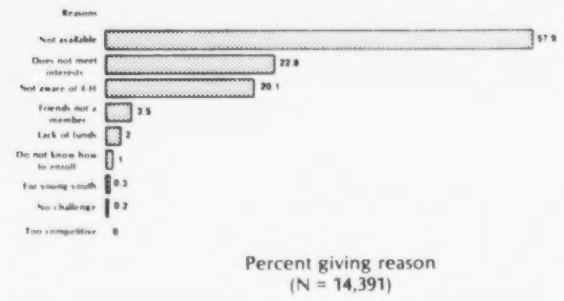
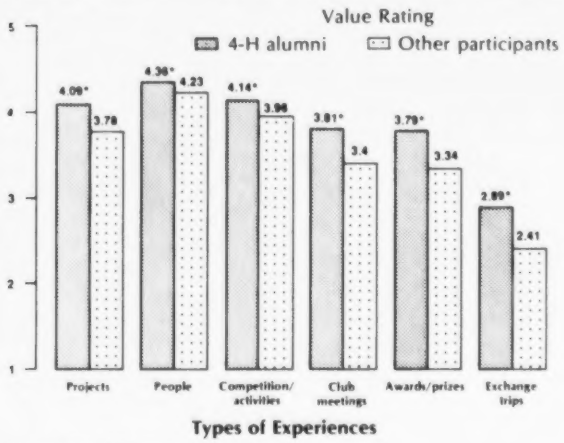
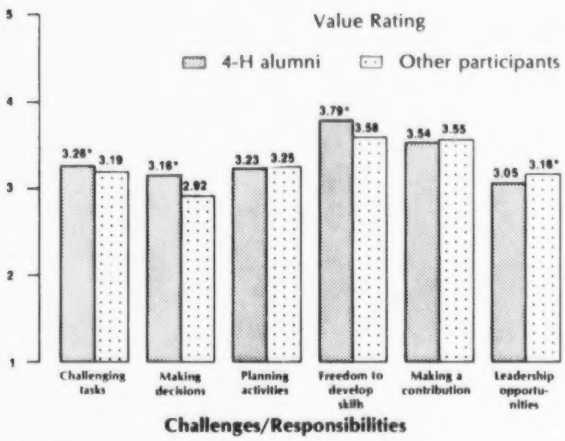


Figure 6. Comparison of ratings of 4-H alumni and other participants on usefulness of experiences in youth organizations.



*Significant difference in mean ratings of $\alpha = 0.05$.

Figure 7. Comparison of ratings of 4-H alumni and other participants on frequency of opportunities for challenges and responsibilities offered by organizations to which they held membership as youths.



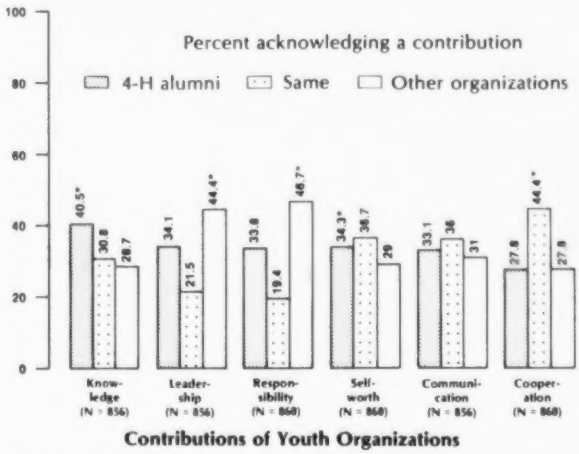
*Significant difference in mean ratings of $\alpha = 0.05$.

- **Which youth organization activities were most valuable in the development of life skills?**

The most useful experiences for both 4-H alumni and other participants came from contact with other people in the organization (Figure 6). In addition, opportunities to develop skills and make a contribution to the organization were most highly rated by both groups (Figure 7). Finally, the largest contributions to personal development for both groups were learning to work with others and developing a sense of responsibility. Based on comparisons of ratings of experiences, 4-H alumni seemed more satisfied with their organization's contributions to personal development than did participants of other organizations.

While more recent 4-H alumni placed higher value on leadership opportunities than did alumni from earlier times, 4-H alumni overall were less satisfied than other participants with opportunities for leadership. Indeed, when 4-H'ers were asked to compare their 4-H experiences to those they had in other youth organizations, a significant number of 4-H'ers indicated that other organizations contributed more to personal leadership development and their developing a sense of responsibility (Figure 8).

Figure 8. 4-H alumni comparison of contributions of 4-H and youth organizations in which they held membership.



*Significant difference in comparison of contributions of youth organizations of $\alpha = 0.05$.

The survey also determined why 4-H alumni left the program. Overall, 59 percent of the 4-H respondents dropped out. The major reason given was that they did not perceive the program to meet their interests (Figure 9).

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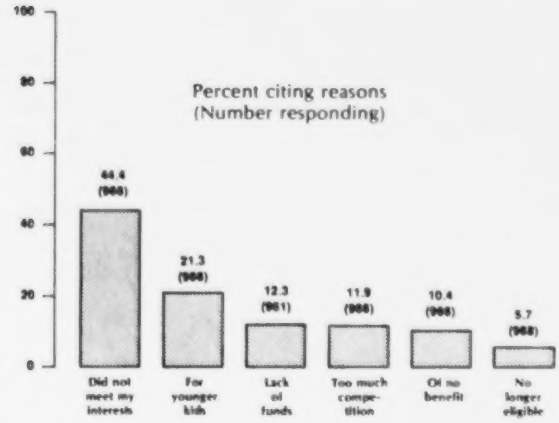
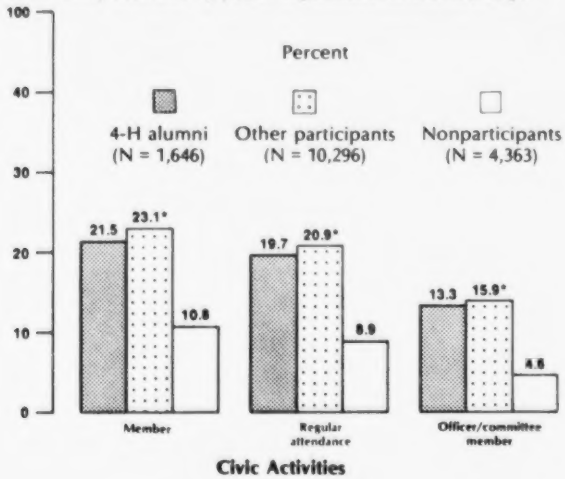
Figure 9. Reasons given by 4-H alumni for dropping out of 4-H.



- **Are 4-H alumni more involved in community activities than those who did not participate in 4-H?**

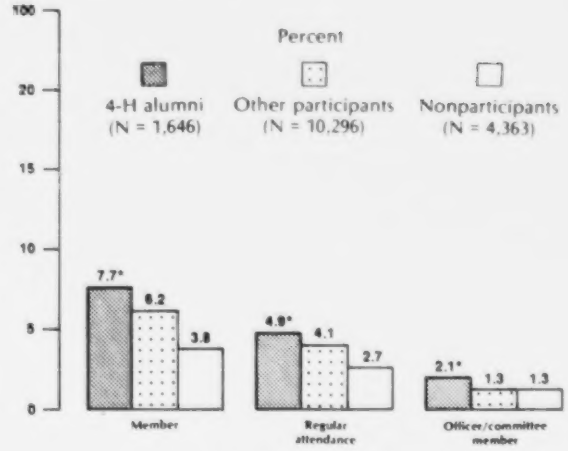
  Participation of respondents as adults in community events and in the programs and services of the Extension Service was limited. Large majorities of each group were not members of community organizations nor users of Extension programs. When respondents were members of community organizations, they often were highly involved in regular attendance and committee membership. Comparisons of 4-H alumni with non-4-H respondents produced significant differences more often than not. 4-H alumni tended to be more involved in community activities and 4-H leadership positions than other groups, particularly nonparticipants of youth programs (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Distribution of respondent participation in community activities by youth organizational membership.

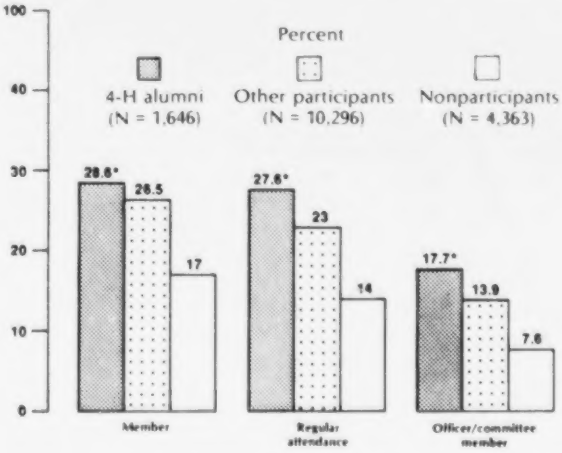


Civic Activities

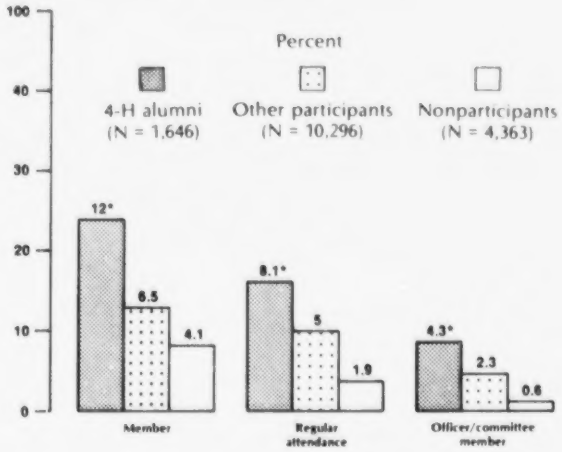
(Continuation of Figure 10)



Chamber of Commerce Activities



Community Event Activities



Agricultural Group Activities

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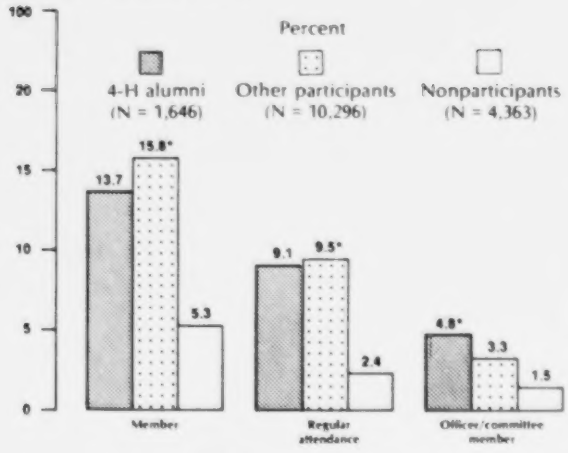
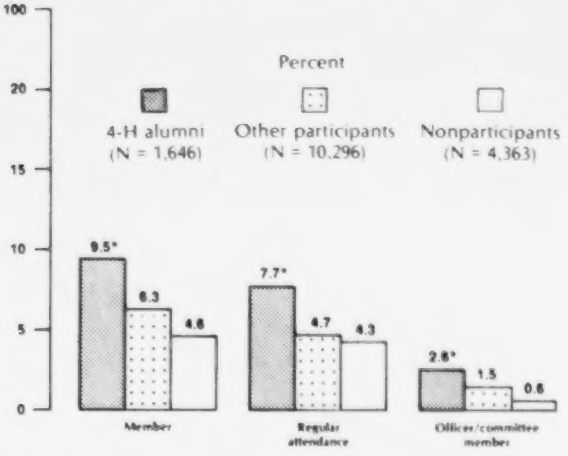
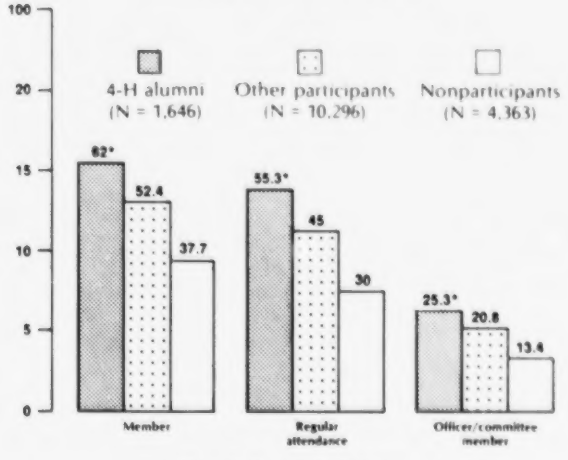
(Continuation of Figure 10)



Political Organization Activities



Industrial Foundation Activities

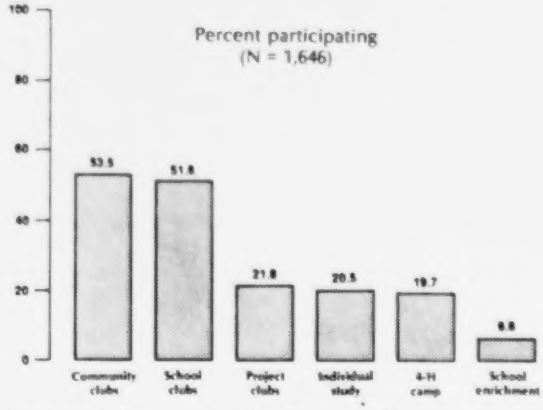


Church Group Activities

*Significant difference among all groups at $\alpha = 0.05$

In addition to these community activities, the 4-H alumni were asked if they participated currently in 4-H activities. Slightly more than half were active in 4-H community and school clubs (Figure 11).

Figure 11. 4-H alumni participation in 4-H activities.



*Significant difference among all groups at $\alpha = .05$.

Because the Extension Service conducts a wide variety of programs and services in addition to the 4-H youth program, all respondents were asked about their and their family's current involvement in Extension programs. As shown in Table 1, the programs and services most often used by all groups were Extension-prepared articles, radio programs and newsletters. Less than one-third of the respondents in each group attended educational programs and/or consulted Extension staff. Although this general pattern prevailed, significant differences in frequency of use were observed among the three study groups for each program and service. Given each program and service, 4-H alumni were more frequent users of Extension programs than other respondents.

- **Does 4-H make a difference?**

Among the factors impacting on life skills, the most dominant variable for members and nonmembers of 4-H was years of participation, followed by entry age and sex of the respondent. Generally, those who were participants for a longer period of time, joined at an early age and were female were more satisfied with the challenges and responsibilities incurred, personal development attained and directions

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Table 1. Frequency of involvement with Extension programs and services.

Interacts on three or more occasions a year to:	4-H Alumni	Other Participants	Non-Participants
	Percent		
Read Extension articles	62.4	41.8	29.6
Listen to Extension radio programs	40.2	23.9	19.8
Receive Extension newsletter	28.1	17.4	14.5
Consult about agricultural/gardening problems	12.6	8.7	2.4
Attend educational programs	12.3	6.9	4.5
Consult with Extension Home Economist	6.9	4.8	2.5

taken by the organization in which they held membership. Moreover, 4-H'ers' satisfaction with their program's challenges and responsibilities had the most significant, positive impact on achieved level of schooling and grades. For other program participants, those with urban backgrounds had more educational achievement while those having less satisfaction from their participation in youth programs made better grades.

The examination of factors impacting on adult community involvement indicated that the oldest and most educated 4-H'ers were the most active, especially in community activities and Extension contact. Adult activity of other participants was attributed to their years of participation in youth programs and residence in the south/north central regions of the country. For nonparticipants, those from the south/north central regions and with higher levels of education tended to be highly active in the community and more frequent users of Extension programs and services.

Conclusions and Implications

4-H membership was rated by 4-H alumni as having a high, positive image when compared to other youth programs. Yet, the 4-H alumni and others identified three factors which could improve the growth and impact of 4-H. One was to enhance the visibility of 4-H to youth not currently in 4-H. A second factor was greater recognition of developmental needs and interests of older youth. (Fifty-nine percent of the 4-H alumni reported dropping out of the program because it no longer met their interests.) Third, opportunities for leadership should accompany the development of leadership skills. (Of the 53 percent of the 4-H alumni who held membership in other youth programs, a significant number felt that their experiences in other youth programs were more helpful in developing leadership skills and receiving the most responsibility.)

Nevertheless, much value was derived from participation in 4-H and other youth programs as well. Large percentages of respondents highly rated the value attained from their contact with people; particularly valued were the contributions of adult volunteer leaders, family members, club meetings and competitions. Participants in all youth programs seemed to rate highly the opportunities they had to develop skills, to make contributions to their programs/organizations and to develop communication and cooperation skills. All wanted more youth leadership opportunities.

Compared to participants of other youth groups, 4-H alumni were more satisfied with the program's contribution to their personal development (e.g., development of self-worth, responsibility development and goal setting). Despite these positive experiences in youth programs, for most participants many of their experiences were not translated into corresponding levels of adult activity. Large majorities were not joiners, yet 4-H alumni were involved more often than others. Further, 4-H alumni were more likely to involve their children in 4-H and other youth programs, and to be involved themselves as 4-H leaders.

In conclusion, this study has shown that youth development programs in general, and 4-H in particular, can make a difference. However, the 4-H program can become even more effective. Three major areas were observed for recommended activity.

1. Extension should publicize its 4-H programs so that nontraditional audiences can be better informed of opportunities for participation.

2. Programs should be designed for older teens. Particular attention should be given to broadening opportunities for leadership.

3. Efforts should be made to ensure that youth activities and programs adequately challenge the personal development skills of all youths, regardless of educational level.

Acknowledgments

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